

Actress Doris Day dies at 97

by [Carrie Rickey](#), Updated: May 13, 2019



AP

Doris Day, 97, the songbird who soared to screen stardom on a Technicolor sunbeam, died early Monday at her home in Carmel Valley, Calif.

“Day had been in excellent physical health for her age, until recently contracting a serious case of pneumonia, resulting in her death,” the Doris Day Animal Foundation said in a statement.

The onetime big-band singer with the apple cheeks, cornflower-blue eyes, and corn-tasseled hair was beloved for her popular songs, films, and wholesomeness. It is hard to name another figure whose sunny persona was so at odds with her stormy life.

That disparity says as much about Miss Day’s soothing, lullaby voice and image as it does about an industry that cast her as the eternal virgin in a series of hugely popular sex comedies without sex. Her virtue was a national joke (Oscar Levant quipped that he knew Doris Day before she was a virgin), her talent a national treasure.

She was not a contradiction but a multimedia phenom who from the first irresistibly created the impression of being both corn-fed and carnal.

Throughout her career, Miss Day was the sunniest of subversives, standing firm against the prevailing winds. During World War II, she was bubblegum-brazen among bobby-soxers, a freckled teenage recording sensation who posed suggestively for magazines as Madonna would decades later.



After the war, when so many women returned to the home, Miss Day was a working single mother and the tomboy-next-door in movie musicals such as *Romance on the High Seas* (1948).

During the ’50s, she played real-life tough girls *Calamity Jane* (1953) and singer Ruth Etting in *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), and articulated the let-it-be philosophy “Que Sera Sera” in the thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956).

Throughout the ’60s, an era of experimentation, she single-handedly suppressed the sexual revolution in chastity comedies such as *Lover Come Back* (1961).

And in a ’60s TV landscape of homemakers, she played a working single mother on *The Doris Day Show* (1968-73), precursor to Mary Tyler Moore’s series.

Her lone Oscar nomination was for *Pillow Talk* (1959), but she was the nation’s top box-office attraction from 1960 to 1965, the first female to hit that sweet spot since moppet Shirley Temple in the 1930s.

Doris Day and Rock Hudson - "The Deception Begins" fro...



Doris Mary Ann Von Kappelhoff was born in Cincinnati in 1922. Her father, a church organist, and her mother, a pretzel baker, were children of German immigrants, involved in their Catholic parish until the marriage ended in 1935 due to her father’s philandering.

To make up for the family’s diminished funds, Mrs. Von Kappelhoff pushed her daughter onto the stage. An aspiring Ginger Rogers, Doris took the prize in a dance contest when she was 12, but shattered her leg in a car accident at 13. During her convalescence, she listened to the radio, teaching herself to sing by mimicking Ella Fitzgerald.

At 16, she won a spot on a Cincinnati radio show. At 17, a club owner inspired by her rendition of “Day After Day” christened her with the alliterative moniker. At 18, she joined Les Brown’s big band as a vocalist. Her intimacy persuaded listeners that she was singing expressly to them. At 19, she married trombonist Al Jorden, who abused her; bore his son, Terry; and bolted the marriage.

After a stint as a radio singer, she re-upped with Brown, who later classed her, along with Frank Sinatra, her future costar, as “the best in the business.” With Terry in the care of her mother, Miss Day hit the road, scoring her first million-seller, “Sentimental Journey,” in 1943, plaintively expressing the longings of servicemen dreaming of home.

Soon the woman with the honey voice took up with saxophonist George Weidler. After a year of keeping company, they married in 1946 and moved to a trailer park in Los Angeles.

A homemaker at last, she refused most offers of outside work. But the family needed money, so Miss Day accepted a job in New York. Fearing that she would outgrow him, Weidler asked for a divorce.

Miss Day returned to California to try to change his mind. She failed. Still upset, she wept through her screen test for *Romance on the High Seas*, originally intended for Judy Garland. The director Michael Curtiz liked her lack of pretense.

Stable, sunshiny Miss Day would seem the opposite of mercurial, melodramatic Garland. Yet the two had much in common besides their golden throats.

Midwestern roots. Broken homes. Stage mothers who pushed them to precocious success. Adolescent anxiety as the support of their families. Adult anxiety as meal tickets for husbands who spent or misappropriated their hard-won earnings. Role reversal with children who entered show business and moonlighted as parent figures to them. What Miss Day possessed that Garland did not was an abiding faith in Christian Science, which sustained her through decades of tumultuous success and tragedy.

The movies enabled Miss Day to buy a home big enough for her mother and son. She dated costars Jack Carson and Ronald Reagan, deeming Carson too remote and Reagan too talky to be good marital fits.

On her 29th birthday in 1951, Miss Day married Marty Melcher, her agent, who adopted Terry. For the next 17 years Melcher micromanaged her career. He insisted that she sing upbeat pop tunes rather than heartfelt ballads. He selected scripts, wardrobe, and coifs.

At first, Melcher's choices broadened Miss Day's range and popular appeal. In films in which she played working women, her characters resolved a harsh conflict through a soothing song.

There was *Calamity Jane* (1953), in which the pistol-packin' tomboy sang "Secret Love." There was *Young at Heart* (1954) in which she had potent chemistry with Sinatra as marrieds with conflicting domestic and musical ambitions. There was *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), as Etting, propelled to success by her abusive protector Marty Snyder (James Cagney), unnervingly brittle belting "10 Cents a Dance," trading sexual favors for fame and getting the bad end of the bargain.

Doris Day sings "Secret Love" from "Calamity Jane" (1953)



And best of all, there was *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), opposite James Stewart, as the singer/mother whose husband wants her to give up her career and whose son is abducted, a double-whammy of identity crisis calmed by her edgy serenade “Que Sera Sera.” Stewart lauded her performance, noting “a singer’s ability ... to put heart in a piece of music is not too far removed from acting.”

She built on those successes with *The Pajama Game* (1957), as a union organizer who falls in love with her boss (John Raitt), and *Teacher’s Pet* (1958), as an idealistic journalism teacher whose student (Clark Gable, a cynical reporter) falls for her.

By accident or design, Miss Day had become a brand: The working woman who prevails. This persona was retooled into the virgin who prevails until marriage. At 37, she was relaunched in *Pillow Talk* (1959) as the professional woman with marzipan skin and spun-sugar hair who said “No” but sang, “Should I Surrender?”

That worked successfully with costars Rock Hudson (*Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, and *Send Me No Flowers*) and Cary Grant (*That Touch of Mink*). It was slightly modified to accommodate her as the virtuous mother and wife opposite James Garner in *The Thrill of It All* and *Move Over, Darling*.

With such confections, Miss Day dominated the box office. She refused the role of Mrs. Robinson, the seducer in *The Graduate* (1967).

In 1958, Miss Day and Melcher separated. The actress was romantically linked to the athletes Elgin Baylor, Jerry West, and Maury Wills, but publicly denied those affairs. (Years later in his memoirs, Wills confirmed that they were involved.) She and Melcher reunited in 1963.

Melcher invested Miss Day’s earnings with lawyer Jerry Rosenthal, whose schemes led to the ruin of many clients, including the actress Dorothy Dandridge.

Melcher died abruptly in 1968 of cardiac complications untreated because of his Christian Science beliefs. Terry Melcher — by then a successful music producer of the Byrds, among others — took charge of his mother’s business affairs. He learned that his stepfather had squandered \$20 million of Miss Day’s earnings. Not only was she penniless, she owed \$500,000.

Reeling from the loss of her husband and his financial treachery, Miss Day was rocked by his final betrayal: He had used his power of attorney to commit her to a television show. She was mortified both by the saccharin story line and the role of a widow. Two decades after her film debut, the box-office queen was alone, broke, and legally obligated to a show she deplored.

While she excavated the ruins of her life, another earthquake hit. In 1969, Terry Melcher and girlfriend Candice Bergen rented their Hollywood Hills home to the filmmaker Roman Polanski and his wife, the actress Sharon Tate. The music producer had rebuffed a songwriter named Charles Manson. Melcher was the intended victim of Manson and his gang’s brutal murder spree that took the lives of Tate and many others.

All through those tragedies, there was Miss Day on TV, amid dogs and daisies. She and her son sued Rosenthal and in 1974 were awarded \$23 million in restitution, later settling with his insurers for \$6 million.

The self-described “Miss Chastity Belt” shocked fans when she revealed her sexual affairs and appetites to biographer A.E. Hotchner in 1975. She did not divulge, though her subsequent chroniclers have, that in the early 1970s she was pursued by the funk musician Sly Stone, who romanced her and wanted to record with her, and the serial womanizer Warren Beatty, who called Miss Day “the one that got away.”

In 1976, Miss Day was wed a fourth time, to Barry Comden, a greeter at a Los Angeles restaurant. They separated in 1979, Comden charging that Miss Day preferred to sleep with her pets rather than with him, and divorced in 1981. It may be that the more she knew of men, the more she preferred dogs.

In 1971, she helped organize Actors and Others for Animals, leaving in 1977 over a disagreement with members who advocated euthanasia. Thus was born the Doris Day Animal Foundation, a house-pet-placement agency.

After her divorce from Comden, she moved to an estate in Carmel called Casa Loco and personally sheltered and fed hundreds of dogs rescued from the streets. Later she founded the Doris Day Animal League.

She would not be wooed back to the screen, despite offers to star in every 1980s prime-time soap opera, including *Dynasty* and *Falcon Crest*. Albert Brooks wrote his movie *Mother* for her, settling on Debbie Reynolds for the title character. Miss Day’s life inspired the principal character in John Updike’s 1985 novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. It’s a safe bet that she is the only woman referenced in songs by the Beatles, Billy Joel, Elton John, Stephen Sondheim, and Wham!

Miss Day was predeceased by her son, who died in 2004. While a complete list of survivors was not immediately available, she owned countless mutts, and always had the philosophy that the best face-lift is a smile.

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Carrie Rickey

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